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OPINION

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Leaks and leakers

A FEW years ago, the Department of State tossed out some old filing cabinets and sent them off for use at a prison in neighboring Virginia.

Unfortunately, one of them contained classified documents that caused a considerable stir when they arrived at the prison.

That was a leak by accident. The antidote was internal discipline against those hapless officials who so carelessly let the documents leave the building.

At the other end of the leaking scale are those traitors to their country who take secret information, usually military-related, and, for reasons either ideological or financial, give it to other governments.

When caught, they are prosecuted.

In between, however, is a huge traffic in leaks of a diverse and complex character. It is this area that is perhaps least understood and causes the greatest controversy.

Washington is probably the most open capital in the world. Thousands of reporters, including those from the Soviet Union, can avail themselves of a torrent of information, statistics, and briefing papers, put out by dozens of government agencies. The White House and State Department hold daily press conferences. Other departments, like the Pentagon, hold briefings regularly.

So much for the formal flow of official information attributed to specific sources.

Now comes the next level. All over Washington, dozens of officials are talking to hundreds of reporters each day. Some of these officials are talking "on background." This means the information can be attributed to official sources, but not to specific individuals. Sometimes the rule is "deep background," meaning the information can be used, but not attributed to any source. Sometimes the rule is "off the record," meaning the information cannot be used. This last category is what reporters like the least, for while they may get inside information this way, the agreement precludes their publishing it.

Officials use these backgrounding techniques for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they enable a diplomat, say, to be franker about a foreign country than he could be if he were being quoted by name and on the record.

A lot of all this is officially sanctioned and even orchestrated. A lot more goes on via the old-boy network. Reporters and officials who have known each other for years trade tips and impressions and inside information.

There is a lot of often hypocritical press criticism of the system. The fact is that many reporters love it, because it gives them information they could not otherwise get. Officials like it, because it gives them protective anonymity while permitting them to publicize particular policies.

All this is leaking of a kind that is either authorized or else countenanced and understood.

Now come the unauthorized leaks.

These are the stories from anonymous officials, stories the government would just as soon not see the light of day.

The most serious are those relating to national security. They might relate to intelligence-gathering techniques, or to movements of special units before some military operation. It is publication of such related stories that has now put Central Intelligence Director William J. Casey in confrontation with a number of news organizations.

A great deal of the leaking, however, relates to policy differences between individuals, Cabinet secretaries, and agencies, before a president has made his ultimate decision. Such leaks are often designed to further one faction's position and harpoon another's.

Both the State Department and the Pentagon have recently removed officials for unauthorized disclosure of confidential information.

It is a contest that will continue between a government that thinks it has the right to conduct some of its business in privacy, and a press that suspects government of wanting to paper over the bad news.